CLIMATE VANGUARD

Youth in the Struggle for Liberation



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About Climate Vanguard

Climate Vanguard is a youth-led organisation empowering youth movements through radical political education.

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Introduction

In the spring of 2024, student encampments sprang up around the world in protest of the genocide in Palestine. To help make sense of this popular upsurge, Climate Vanguard published this brief.

Over two years later, we have revisited and updated this work, stepping back from the immediate context of the student encampments to craft a more refined analysis of the role of youth in the struggle for liberation.

This brief begins by analysing youth as an oppressed group before unpacking how youth have powered historical movements for social change. It concludes by outlining the prospects for a revolutionary youth subject today.



Figure 1: In April 2024, student protesters took over a Columbia University building, renaming it Hind's Hall after the martyred six-year-old Hind Rajab. *AP*.

Youth as an Oppressed Group

Youth are people who are transitioning from childhood to adulthood.[a] Under capitalism, this transition is centred on transforming youth into productive workers.[b] This process entails three distinct forms of oppression.

1. Forced Socialisation

Children are typically born into nuclear families where their parents, or adult guardians, have near total socio-economic and legal control over their lives, from how they spend their time to determining their medical care.[1]

Although the nuclear family can be a source of love and security for some children, it can often be a site of oppression and trauma. This can especially be true for marginalised groups, such as queer and feminised people, whose parents simultaneously reject who they are and restrict them from accessing alternative communities of care.[2] Structurally, the nuclear family is responsible for producing the next generation of workers at no cost, a process without which capitalism could not function.[3]

This is similarly borne out through the education system, which socialises children in a hierarchical structure akin to the workplace.[4] The discipline, obedience, and individualism expected of children at school are qualities that are easily translated into the world of work.[5]

More fundamentally, youth are structurally denied access to a type of education that nurtures critical thinking and interrogation of the world.[6] Instead, they are treated as empty vessels to be filled with information and skills that reinforce the status quo, reducing youth to passive objects rather than active agents of change.[7]

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a There is no universal definition of the age group of youth; however, typically, individuals are considered part of the youth demographic from approximately age 15 until somewhere between the ages of 15 to 35.

b The vast majority of young people, like the vast majority of society, belong to the working class. This means that they rely on wages for their social reproduction, as opposed to the profits accrued through the ownership of capital.

2. Surplus Workforce

Once they reach working age, youth today are often consigned to the "reserve army" of labour, the section of the working class that is able to work but unable to find employment.[8] The greater the number of unemployed workers, the higher the competition for jobs, which allows capitalists to cut wages and increase their profits.

Although there is a general tendency for youth to find themselves in the reserve army of labour, this dynamic looks quite different for youth in the Global North compared to those in the Global South.

Youth in the Global North experience higher rates of unemployment than older generations.[9] For example, in the wealthy OECD countries, the average 2024 unemployment rate for those aged 15 to 24 is 11.1%, compared to 4.1% for those aged 25 and over.[10,c,d] In the UK, nearly one million young people (aged 16 to 24) are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).[11]

Higher education is also no longer a guaranteed path to material security under late-stage neoliberalism.[12,e] 42% of recent US college graduates are underemployed, which means that their job does not typically require a university degree.[13] Of this group, over 85% are "severely underemployed," working in jobs that typically require only a high school degree, such as office support, retail, food service, and construction jobs.[14] Since 1979, wages in these sectors have declined in real terms.[15,f]

Shut out from the economy, an increasing number of Global North youth are turning to the military for a stable career. For example, the recent surge in US military recruitment is primarily due to young people's desire

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c This includes a range. For example, the Southern European countries Spain and Greece have a youth unemployment rate in excess of 24%, as compared to Japan, which has the lowest youth unemployment rate in the entire OECD (4%) (OECD, n.d.).

d This is not to argue that 15 year olds should be in employment rather than education.

e The exception to this trend are youth with postgraduate degrees. However, this level of educational attainment is often reserved for youth from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Côté, 2013).

f This data uses wages for workers with a high school diploma or less as a proxy for sectoral wages.

for economic security, which the military promises with its generous home loans, pension, and free college tuition.[16,g]

In this way, the youth reserve army of labour in the Global North is absorbed into the actual army, whose primary purpose is the perpetuation of imperialist violence in defence of capitalism. Ironically, this means young people are serving to uphold the very system at root of their economic oppression.



Figure 2: US military recruitment campaign launched in the early 2020s to explicitly target youth. *US Army.*

In the Global South, youth are also part of the reserve army of labour, but they face more intense oppression than those in the Global North. This is due to imperialist super-exploitation, which cheapens Southern labour and nature in order to extract and accumulate value in the Global North.[h]

For example, youth unemployment rates are generally higher in the Global South, including extreme cases like Arab States (26.2%) and Northern Africa (22.6%), regions that have been particularly impacted by US-led processes of de-development.[17] And although low-income countries technically have a lower average youth unemployment rate (8.8%) than high-income countries (11.1%), this comparison ignores the fact that nearly 9 in 10 workers in low- and lower-middle-income countries are in informal work, which is an extremely precarious form of employment.[18] Global South countries also have far more youth who are NEET (195.4 million people) than the Global North (17.8 million

g However, in practice, veterans often lack adequate care after returning from service. For example, there are over 30,000 veterans in the US who are unhoused (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

h For more information on imperialist value transfer, see Climate Vanguard's brief *Defining Imperialism, Colonialism, and Neo-Colonialism.*

people), further narrowing young people's already limited prospects for economic security.[19,i]

Although working-class youth from across the world are suffering from structural oppression, those in the Global South are at the sharper end of it. Through imperialism, they are incorporated into a larger surplus workforce, forcing them to accept low-wage and often informal labour, which in turn enables the flow of value to the North.



Figure 3: Young people protest in Libya, a country that has been de-developed by US-led intervention and where youth unemployment is above 50%. *Mahmud Turkia/AFP/Getty Images.*

3. Eroding Social Conditions

Capitalism is not only denying today's youth access to work, it's also undermining young people's basic ability to lead a dignified life. This is especially true in the current late-stage neoliberal period, in which youth have been locked out of asset accumulation.[20,j]

i This statistic does not account for all countries in the Global North and South. Instead, it uses the World Bank's country income classifications as a proxy for these geographic groups, specifically high-income countries (composed exclusively of Global North countries) and low-income and lower-middle-income countries (composed exclusively of Global South countries).

j Neoliberalism is the form of capitalism that replaced social democracy. It reduced the role of the state in social welfare provision, replaced industrial production with financial services, and encouraged market logic in all aspects of social life. Late-stage neoliberalism is the current period of neoliberalism, in which the system is crisis-ridden and devoid of real legitimacy, but continues to exist in a zombie-like form.

Unaffordable housing is a classic example of capitalist immiseration. In the EU, the average age at which a young person leaves their parental home is increasing.[21] In extreme cases, like Poland and Portugal, over half of people aged 25–34 live at home.[22] Youth who are able to make the jump to independent housing are overburdened by high rent costs. For example, 47% of youth in Denmark and 34% of youth in Sweden spend over 40% of their income on rent.[23] Home ownership is also increasingly out of reach, with average housing prices in Europe increasing by close to 60% since 2010.[24]



Figure 4: Protest in Lisbon over the housing crisis. *Diogo Ventura/Observador.*

The housing crisis in the Global South is considerably worse. The majority of the 1.1 billion people living in informal settlements are in the Global South, of whom youth make up a major component.[25] Without access to a stable job, many youth in the Global South resort to living with networks of family and friends, which "can persist for decades."[26]

Youth also face a severe mental health crisis. Globally, one in seven 10–19-year-olds have a mental health condition, with suicide being the third leading cause of death among youth aged 15–29.[27] This cannot be separated from the ills of contemporary capitalism, including economic insecurity, the rise of social media, and rampant social alienation.[28] Meanwhile, capitalism and imperialism hinder access to adequate mental

health care, especially in the Global South, where governments are forced to repay external debts rather than fund public healthcare budgets.[29]

Finally, deteriorating social conditions must be situated within the broader trajectory of ecological breakdown. Today's young people live in a world that is hotter than at any point in the last 125,000 years.[30] The attendant heatwaves, floods, and crop failures will only worsen as emissions continue to rise and the planet careens to irreversible ecological collapse.[31] Quite simply: young people are being robbed of a habitable planet due to capitalism's ceaseless drive for profit.



Figure 5: Homes submerged in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province during the 2022 floods that covered a third of the country and affected 33 million people. *Zahid Hussain/AP.*

Youth as an Agent of Change

Young people have the capacity to resist their oppression and struggle for a new world. Indeed, throughout history, youth have been key agents of change, often playing leading roles. Below, we offer a brief history of how they have powered socialist revolutions, national liberation struggles, and popular uprisings.

Socialist Revolutions

The Bolsheviks – the leading force of the Russian Revolution – had a significant youth base. In 1907, 75% of Bolshevik members were under 30 years old – a demographic composition that was significant in "freeing" the party from conservative tendencies.[32] During the 1917 Russian Revolution, thousands of young people fought for the Red Army.[33] And by 1926, Komsomol, the dedicated youth wing of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, reached 1.75 million members.[34]

The Black Panther Party (BPP), although not an explicitly youth organisation, was also largely composed of young people, from its rank-and-file membership to top leadership.[k] Huey Newton was 24 when he co-founded the BPP with 29-year-old Bobby Seale, and their first recruit was Bobby Hutton, who joined at the age of 16.[35] Fred Hampton, the Chairman of the Illinois chapter of the BPP, was just 21 when he was murdered by the police.[36]

Many other revolutionaries were young when they assumed leadership roles. For example, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Camilo Cienfuegos were 28, 30, and 24 years old, respectively, when they sailed from Mexico to Cuba in 1956 to overthrow the Batista regime.

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k Youth also played a significant role in the wider civil rights movement, of which the Black Panther Party was a part. For example, the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins, and the Little Rock Nine were youth-led actions.



Figure 6: Bobby Seale (left) and Huey P. Newton (right), founders of the Black Panther Party.

National Liberation Struggles

In 1925, a young Hồ Chí Minh established the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, a Marxist-Leninist organisation dedicated to educating and training revolutionaries.[37,l] Ultimately, members of the Youth League formed the core of the Indochinese Communist Party, which powered the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle.[38]

In South Africa, youth were "the main anti-apartheid change agent," acting as a guiding force within the national liberation movement.[39] Across a range of organisations – from the African National Youth League in the 1940s and 1950s to Black Consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s and the United Democratic Front in the 1980s and 1990s – youth repeatedly built new forms of collective power themselves to steer the movement's direction of travel.[40]

Youth have also been central to the Palestinian liberation movement. For example, George Habash was in his mid-20s when he co-founded the Arab Nationalist Movement in 1951–1952 with other students at the American University of Beirut.[41] Similarly, the General Union of Palestinian Students, founded in 1959, unified student organisations across West Asia and developed leaders like Yasir Arafat, who would go on to lead the Palestine Liberation Organization from 1969 to 2004.[42] Today, the Palestinian Youth Movement continues this legacy by organising the Palestinian and Arab diaspora across the Global North.

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l Marxism-Leninism is a revolutionary theory and practice that combines Marx's analysis of class struggle and capitalism with Lenin's theory of imperialism, the revolutionary party, and the organisation of working-class power.



Figure 7: Palestinian youth during the first Intifada, 1987. *Peter Stepan.*

Popular Uprisings

The uprisings of 1968 were fundamentally a youth rebellion. Sparked by student protests, huge mobilisations erupted around the world, including in Western Europe, the United States, Pakistan, Tunisia, Mexico, Brazil, and Japan. Although politically heterogenous, 1968 was an ideological and cultural revolution which "was born within the youth, but spread rapidly throughout society."[43]

Youth, again, showed their mobilising capacity in the so-called 'Arab Spring.'[44] Although certain uprisings were instrumentalised by imperialist powers, such as in Libya and Syria, the sparks for many of these revolts were rooted in the oppressive conditions of neoliberalism, which, as explored above, provided youth with little means for socio-economic mobility.[45]

Youth: Today's Revolutionary Subject?

Extending this historical legacy, today's young people can become a motive force in the fight for a new world. But this requires specific interventions that turn objective conditions of class oppression into the subjective desire for eco-socialist transformation.

Indeed, youth are not pre-formed revolutionaries but a terrain of struggle that requires active shaping. As Che Guevara put it, youth are the "malleable clay" for constructing a revolutionary society.[46]

1. Inspire

Under neoliberalism, youth are told that they are entrepreneurs who can attain 'the good life' by increasing their own economic value.[47] But as the economic returns of higher education diminish and asset ownership becomes an ever more distant prospect, this meritocratic myth is beginning to break down.[48]

We need a new vision that speaks to young people's desires and directs them towards an eco-socialist horizon. First and foremost, this vision must confront young people's sense of insecurity, both economic and social. But rather than framing security through an individualist lens, it must be rooted in a strong sense of belonging and collective purpose. For example, instead of competing for individual assets, an eco-socialist vision calls for the democratisation of all of society's wealth, with everyone guaranteed dignified work and access to decommodified goods, including housing, healthcare, education, energy, and food.[m]

Importantly, this vision includes all peoples of the world, not just a certain national group. In an age of existential crises, especially ecological breakdown and global war, it can be politically expedient to retreat behind borders and scapegoat vulnerable people. Indeed, this is the prerogative of the far right, which has successfully gained youth support, particularly among young men.[n] An eco-socialist vision rejects this, making clear that no member of the global working class will be left behind.

2. Educate

Beyond inspiring youth through an attractive political programme, it is critical that we build both their clarity about the root causes of their oppression and their confidence in an eco-socialist world.

The 'raw material' for revolutionary consciousness already exists. For example, a global survey found that 48.2% of youth identify "growing inequality between the rich and poor" as the primary economic trend that will impact their future most.[49] Other polling suggests that socialism is viewed favourably, including in Britain and the north of Ireland, where, in 2021, 67% of youth aged 16–34 expressed their desire to live in a socialist economy.[50]

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m For more information on eco-socialism, see Climate Vanguard's brief *Towards Eco-Socialism: A World in Transition.*

n For example, in Germany, the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* increased its vote share among 18–24 year-olds from 5.4% in 2013 to 19% in 2025. Meanwhile, in France, the far-right *Rassemblement National* increased its vote share among 18-24 year-olds from 6% in 2002 to 33% in 2024 (Burtin, 2026).

These political instincts, rooted in deteriorating material conditions, must be sharpened into clear political coordinates. Social media is one place where this process of politicisation can begin, but it must be taken further, extending into real-world organisation and collective action.

3. Organise

Support for eco-socialism means very little if not transmuted into political organising. By joining an organisation with like-minded people, young people find a political community that can deepen their learning and anchor them in the long struggle for a new world.

Over the past 10 years, we have witnessed how youth have driven mass social struggles, from the explosive climate mobilisations in 2019 to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and the Palestine student encampments in 2024. Indeed, this demonstrates how youth, as the inheritors of the future, often act as a bellwether for social change.

Rather than let these uprisings fizzle out, they must be captured in organisational infrastructure, the kind that can continue to recruit youth during the ebbs of social struggle and then capitalise on its peaks.[o]



Figure 8: Members and supporters of RedFox, the youth wing of the Workers' Party of Belgium. *RedFox*.

o For more information on the necessary organisational infrastructure, see Climate Vanguard's brief *The Eco-Socialist Party.*

Conclusion

In the current conjuncture, where the opportunity for radical change sharpens by the day, but eco-socialist consciousness remains elusive, it is essential that we actively develop revolutionary subjects.

Throughout history, young people have shown themselves to be capable of resisting their own oppression and waging a broader struggle for social transformation. Today's youth are no different.

Economically disadvantaged and staring down a catastrophic future, there is both a material and ideological opportunity to create a generation that steers humanity from ruin to revolution.



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